"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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IN DEFENSE OF THE SMALL RURAL CHURCH*

By Harry E. Bicksler**

In these days of mass production, high finances, and regimentation, we have a tendency to think in such big terms that we lose the true value of small things. We become so efficient that we are in danger of becoming mechanical in our church work, as is often true in educational and social work. While appreciating centralization of country schools, of farmers, cooperative work, and more and more of the country church, this country preacher dares to send up a cry against centralizing simply for centralization's sake, or even for cold reasons of financial efficiency. Christ teaches us that there is something more than the rule of thumb, that one cannot measure only by mathematical processes. This must be recognized in education, or we shall continue to educate youth without moral or spiritual principles. This factor dare not be left out of the cooperative movement in America, if it is to succeed. The legion of failures in the cooperative organizations in this country is largely because we lacked the Russell whom Ireland had, the Grundtvig whom Denmark had, Kagawa whom Japan has, Oberlin whom Germany had, or the Coady whom Nova Scotia has. There must be something more than dollar savings for farmers. There must be a human and spiritual quality. In church work in the country are we going to forget this factor in order to save dollars or to report figures to the General Assembly?

"Close the country churches, and make them come to town." We are doing this with our one-room school houses. We have done it largely with our country stores and our creameries. Therefore why not do it with our churches? Our great difficulty is that we generalize too much. There is little doubt in our mind that this centralizing should be done in many communities, and all concerned would be better off. But to close all of our little churches throughout the nation, without carefully considering many things beside numbers and dollars, would be a great tragedy and an irreparable loss to the Church at large. According to the reasoning of some church people, all small mountain springs should be shut off. Anyone who has climbed the divides will recall the little springs and tiny streams. One realizes the purity of those mountain streamlets, and has sense enough to know that their waters combined with those of many other such insignificant beginnings will make the Mississippi or the Colorado rivers.

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*Adapted from Chapter 4 of Mr. Bicksler's THE PARISH OF THE TEMPLED HILLS

**Rev. Harry E. Bicksler is Presbyterian minister of the Parish of the Templed Hills, Oak Hill, Ohio. In the words of the late Warren H. Wilson, "The parish ...is a shrine of Welsh memories and Welsh customs, beautiful, melodious, poetical, and devout; the sermon is still highly esteemed and the little congregation, ruled by the elders, is still the custom in southern Ohio. So a parish has been formed in the modern manner out of these little churches. Thus far its effect has been to preserve the small congregations with their dignity and precious fellowship and to build a central place at which the minister may live in the country among his people."

This country preacher is so proud of being at one of these sources in the hills that he often views with both sadness and amusement the superior attitude of some who must live in the large centers of population and who look with contempt on the home missionary or the pastor of a weak church that attempts to be self-supporting. We thank God that such scorners are few. We thank God even more for the friendly and brotherly attitude of the pastors of some of our largest and most successful city churches. For a number of years it was our privilege to carry the message of National Missions to the larger churches in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Ohio, and in this way came in contact with many of our large churches. Generally, their treatment of the country pastor was considerate, their courtesy was wonderful--a thing to be cherished. Too often, though, in the meetings of the presbytery, the synod or the General Assembly, there is an attitude of contempt, which many home missionaries resent.

Having served in several synods and all but two years out of twenty-two in mission churches, we have found as fine a group of ministers in this capacity as could be found in any part of our great Church--men who never considered whether they were honored or neglected, only how they might go on serving in their Master's name. It is true that in every synod in which we have served we have found men who had an attitude of inferiority. They felt that they were abused and ill-treated, that once a home missionary, always a home missionary. Men have told us in confidence that they continued to serve in mission churches because once there, other churches refused to consider them, as if the term home missionary were a stigma. Some of these men were superior men, well-trained and capable. We are confident that there is some truth in this.

Having been so wonderfully treated personally by the Presbyterian Church because we have been a home missionary, it may sound unappreciative for us to speak of the unfair treatment shown home missionaries. Eight years ago we had a sabbatical year, of which we took full advantage, traveling and studying the country church and the cooperatives in Great Britain and Northern Europe. With two other home missionaries we attended the General Assemblies of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and in each were given full honors by them as though we were commissioned to attend by the General Assembly of our church. Without doubt this is the first and only time in the history of American Presbyterianism that country preachers were given this honor. Heretofore it has been the pastors of our great city churches, presidents of our large educational institutions, or men who hold the high offices of our General Assembly who have been so honored, and who ever heard of an actual home missionary's being chosen for these high offices?

Ours is a great missionary church, and there should be no unfair partiality between missionaries because of the part of the globe in which they serve. Salaries have often been disgraceful. Men could not keep up their libraries, or take months off for study and spiritual refreshment, and often they could not provide necessary medical treatment for their families. I am speaking for the men who are serving the little churches, and often in the hard places. Is it any wonder if sometimes they develop a feeling of inferiority? The great miracle is that they do not take such an attitude more often.

We have been proud to serve little churches on the National Mission field for twenty years. Things which we have had are the right of any missionary who does his work well, whether he serves in India or Wyoming, in South America or Ohio. He has a right to feel that he is just as important a factor in the Presbyterian Church as the pastor of the largest church of New York or Chicago. It is vital to the Presbyterian Church that ministers be equal according to the quality of their service.

A little church, even though it receives mission support, need not hang its head if it justifies that support by its service and product. A church needs to bow in humility if it is not measuring up, whether it be small or large.

The record of many little churches, such as these of The Parish of the Templed Hills, could well be envied by much larger churches. One only needs to take count in our large churches of those members who came from such little country churches. A sad thing will be discovered if one notes the age of those who stand to say they came from the country church. Most of them will be fifty years of age or older. Why so few under fifty years? Has the country church stopped feeding the city church? If so, where will they get their new recruits? It is said that the city does not reproduce itself. Country boys and girls are still going to the city, but most often are not going to the church. At least much of the growth of the city church is from children of those reared in the country. The country is still growing boys and girls. True, the families are only half the size they used to be, often less.

Let us consider the churches of this parish forty years ago. There are two things you will notice if you study the individual church histories recorded in brief in this booklet. You will notice that forty and fifty years ago their membership was at its height. If you had the records, you would know that even before that time the strong virile youth had been sent to college and had gone away to serve elsewhere. Others went to the cities into business, factories or stores. Many of the fine young girls went to work in city homes. They went as church young people and united with the churches where they went.

One can take the records of churches in almost any Ohio city and find those who went from these five churches, not only in the pews but as deacons and elders. Not many years ago it was said that twenty-two elders in Cincinnati came from these churches. Four years ago every elder in the Miami Presbyterian Church of Columbus came from this place. A long list of ministers not only in the Presbyterian Church, but in the Methodist Episcopal, the Congregational, and other churches were reared in these little churches. Roland Evans who died in West Africa a few years ago was a boy from Peniel, the smallest of the five churches. Mrs. Eunice Edwards who spent a full life of service in China, came from Moriah. Mr. J. Jordan Jones who for many years was treasurer for the General Assembly of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church, was from Peniel. And so the story goes. Just think of drying up a spring like this! There are many other such places over the country. Instead of closing them, for the good of the Church we need to help clear them, and make it easier again to send forth a flow to refresh our land, and to generate power.

Yes, I am a proud minister. Proud, while humble, in the honor that has been conferred upon me, to serve under our Board of National Missions, in a country parish, this country parish. We know these churches have no right to expect ever to be much larger than they are, for we know that as fast as we rear strong youth they will go forth to serve elsewhere. Only we pray that in each generation there will be a fair number who, while they are capable of taking their place in the world with the best, will hear the call to remain at home, to carry on the work here at its best, and so serve humanity and the Kingdom of God.

What do we see in the present status here in these five churches? We have as fine a crop of boys and girls and youth, as ever was produced. During the summer months in our Parish rallies or socials we can bring together from one hundred to one hundred and fifty young people. The very fact that with all these young people certain work is difficult during the winter months because of attendance at high schools and colleges, or because of teaching in some other community, is something to give you of the city churches, courage, for it indicates the type of young people they are. Best of all, we are winning them for the church and training them for others. Of the eighty we received into church membership during the past four years, practically all are young people. These churches, with their parish organization, with their young people with their relation to the activities of the Presbyterian Church, and with connection with every good activity in their county, are looking forward. They have great visions.

One more thing needs to be told of the little churches such as these. They love good preaching. If you are a minister and visit such a church, do not look down on them, and say any old sermon will do. It won't. They know a good sermon, and they expect it. We have never been challenged so before. Worship is a very real thing. Spiritual and social fellowship means much. If you have known it and lost it in the hurry and worry of life and should visit a little church, you will look with envy on it there, and long for it again. After the holy communion tomorrow we know that many will go home and at their dinner talk over the service and the sermon. You cannot make good with them and try to deceive them with a sermon you have already preached to them, and have been too busy or too lazy to follow with another. They like a sermon frankly preached a second time. But they have thought it over the first time and are aware of what you are doing. When we visit you who are of the city, and attend with you your beautiful churches and hear your great organs, we appreciate them, for they are wonderful. But we also are sorry you cannot have many of the things that we have. We love our little white frame or our little red brick church, each set on a hill. One Sunday at Bethel the doors were open, and the preacher had to stop, for a mocking bird was just outside, and what wonderful music he gave us!

It is not perfect. Too often little country churches are barren, when God has given them every advantage to be beautiful. A little planting around them, a little work inside, and what a difference! But so many homes in the country are the same. Our aim in this Parish is to have the beauty of God around the churches and homes and on the inside as well. We want to rear lives that are just as beautiful before God and man.

These little churches and their children will have a place in the Kingdom of God, and by His grace we shall have our share in bringing this to pass. We are glad we are where we are, and can think of nothing bigger or better